



WSASCD e-briefs

## What the Whole Child & Whole Educator Needs Now!

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### Intentional Community Partnerships Centered on Supporting the Whole Child

*At the time of this writing, the social and emotional needs of our youth are dire, with rates of mental health problems among children and adolescents markedly increasing and suicide rates at an all-time high. Just recently, several leading health and policy organizations, including the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, declared a state of emergency for child and adolescent mental health. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, many of our youth did not have access to and/or did not receive sufficient mental health care, and although the social and emotional-related effects of the pandemic have yet to be fully realized, they have already exacerbated existing service gaps and inequities, creating even more demand for school-based supports that are effective and well-coordinated.*



**Tacoma Whole Child (TWC)** is an ongoing partnership between the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT) and Tacoma Public Schools (TPS). For over a decade now, TWC has been transforming schools by striving to create safe, positive, engaging, and equitable learning environments. The TWC partnership facilitates the uptake of cohesive social, emotional, and behavioral supports that are culturally

responsive, trauma-informed, and nurture the skills necessary for our youth to thrive in today's global society. This engaged work with district leaders, school teams, educators, counselors, school psychologists, families, and students, applies research-based and equity-centered frameworks to meet each school community's needs.

As a result of the ongoing Whole Child work within the district and at the school level, we've witnessed our team of educators in Tacoma remain committed to supporting youth, improve their practice, and engage in ongoing learning. Last year, Tacoma's school board recognized several sites with awards for their outstanding commitment to ensure that students are safe, healthy, engaged, challenged, and

supported. Amongst these sites, we saw exemplars recognized for centering student voices through mentor groups and seminars; implementation of systems and practices that strengthen relationships and connections between students, families/caregivers, and staff; and ongoing engagement in professional learning on systemic racism and bias. In one building, students stated that they felt more connected to their teachers and peers because of this focus on relationships and community-building. Student outcomes included post-high school exploration/curiosity, on-time graduation, and improved attendance. Salient action steps included restorative practices as an alternative to exclusionary discipline, implementation of signature SEL practices (e.g., emotion check-ins, greeting students at the door), and centering student voices policy changes around inclusivity.



While there are numerous bright spots surrounding the Tacoma Whole Child, we also value and recognize the need for continuous improvement in our work. Since the genesis of the TWC partnership, we have ascertained the value of the collective, cooperative effort. The conditions of the pandemic have underscored considerable inequities, areas of need, and opportunities for growth, along with the acknowledgement that addressing multi-faceted problems requires more than the work of one or a few. Simply put, collaboration is crucial if we really want to implement the equitable, antiracist practices. To this end, TWC has increased the number of team members and the diversity of perspectives and roles of its members. With our school and community partners, we are re-defining and clarifying the vision, goals, and body of work to be organized by the district team. With this enhanced team and a sharper vision at the helm, TWC is working toward the creation of comprehensive and coordinated services for youth and enhanced supports for educators, students, and families/caretakers.



Going forward, the team has reaffirmed their commitment to collect and review data (e.g., discipline data, mental health screening, needs assessments) more strategically with intentions to uncover unseen or underrealized needs among populations often pushed to the margins. Although collaboration with our communities may be complicated and take more time, we know this time is a wise and necessary investment in the futures of our communities and youth. Choosing our own comfort and convenience moves us away from the transformative and meaningful work that is needed right now.

**Key, recent activities of TWC:**

- creating district TWC values, vision & mission with input of stakeholders,
- identifying priorities (as they have substantively shifted over these last few years),
- supporting schools in the creation of SEL action plans,
- developing district-specific SEL student learning benchmarks,
- professional development around SEL, ethnic studies, identifying need and strength,
- collecting and reviewing district-level data (e.g., climate, needs assessments, discipline data),
- communicating with partners (e.g., community organizations, counselors, psychologists, special education, families),
- presentations and knowledge dissemination at regional and national conferences, including panel presentations at the PBS Annual meeting, Northwest Positive Behavior Support Network (NWPBIS), and the Washington State Association of School Psychologists (WSASP),
- active involvement and leadership in the SEL Community of Practice through the UWT Office of Community Partnerships

**To learn more:**

<https://www.tacomaschools.org/departments/tacoma-whole-child>

<https://www.tacomaschools.org/departments/tacoma-whole-child/classroom>

<https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/community-partnerships/tacoma-whole-child-initiative>

<https://www.tacoma.uw.edu/community-partnerships/social-emotional-learning-community-practice>

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